

Origins of Mikhail Vrubel's *Demoniana* series.

Master's Thesis

Amina Fakhri

Art History

Faculty of Arts

University of Helsinki

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Tiivistelmä - Abstrakt - Abstract The Demoniana series is the most researched of all of Mikhail Vrubel's work, yet the origins of the series' imagery remain neglected. Scholars have attributed Demoniana's imagery to a literary origin - the poem Demon by Mikhail Lermontov. Focusing on the relationship between the painted material of the series, Demon seated (1890), Demon in-flight (1899), Demon downcast (1902), and Six-Winged Seraph (Azrael) (1904) in addition to the illustrations to the poem in the Jubilee edition of Lermontov's poetry published in 1899-1891, my research challenges the assumptions of the continuity of the Demoniana series and shows that the basis for its imagery can be found in Vrubel's earlier works. In his Demoniana series, Vrubel is searching for a new kind of hero, one that he felt certain would make his name immortal. The character of the fallen angel, in Vrubel's view, a tortured soul, not necessarily evil, was an interesting choice considering the influence of the church in the society at that time. In many ways, the artist identified personally with this character. Demoniana was not only a quest for artistic immortality but also an attempt to determine a contemporary representation of a kind of spirituality, a search for the path to salvation. Setting the Demoniana series imagery in the context of a broader field of Vrubel's works, I am planning to contrast his borrowed and invented imagery from earlier sketches and murals with the literary inspiration of Lermontov's poem in the illustrations. I shall argue that Mikhail Vrubel's version of the character of the Demon is different from Mikhail Lermontov's. Exploring issues of Vrubel's religious painting tradition and the origins of his unique technique I attempt to show how the artist accomplished his own interpretation and embodiment of the character of the Demon.	
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Context, validation, and research question

My thesis focuses on the Russian artist Mikhail Vrubel's (1856-1910) paintings and illustrations, collectively known as the *Demoniana* series (1889-1904). Mikhail Vrubel was a Russian painter of the Art Nouveau movement and the early Symbolism era. He was mostly known for his unusual manner of painting that was highly influenced by the Late Byzantine and Early Renaissance European art traditions.<sup>1</sup>

My focus in this study is on the *Demoniana* series, which Mikhail Vrubel revered as his ultimate masterpiece.<sup>2</sup> It is a series of four paintings and several monochrome watercolors and illustrations that were created over a period of 14 years. Mikhail Vrubel officially started the conceptual art for the series with a monochrome watercolor sketch called *Head of the Demon* in May 1890 and had already begun work on the *Demoniana* painted series before he was commissioned to create the illustrations for the anniversary edition of Mikhail Lermontov's poetry.<sup>3</sup> Vrubel's work on the edition helped crystallize the concept for the *Demoniana* painted series but functioned as independent illustration work for the Lermontov issue. Mikhail Vrubel added new paintings, pencil drawings, watercolors and illustrations to the *Demoniana* series throughout his life until finally reaching the end of the character's journey with the painting *Six-winged Seraph (Azrael)* in 1904.

In addition to his work on the *Demoniana* series, Vrubel also enjoyed a fruitful career as a master in portraiture. Among his famous portraits are ones of Savva Mamontov (1897) and Valery Bryusov (1906). He also met great success as a crafts designer and mural artist. His work can be found at the Morozova Estate in Moscow, Russia; St. Cyril Church in Kyiv, Ukraine; and the Abramtsevo Crafts Centre in Moscow Oblast, Russia.

Due to the tragic circumstances of his later years, Mikhail Vrubel was regarded by contemporaries and researchers of the early twentieth century mostly as a tragic figure—a tortured artist who lost his mind in a desperate effort to capture

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<sup>1</sup> Sternin, *Ot Repina Do Vrubelia*, 87.

<sup>2</sup> Vrubel, *Pisma sestre*, 38-45.

<sup>3</sup> Lermontov, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, Vol.2.

something “demonic.”<sup>4</sup> In reality, Mikhail Vruble was a successful artist, albeit of a fragile mental disposition, who wanted to become famous and succeeded in this venture, only to be driven blind and, subsequently, mad as a consequence of untreated syphilis.<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Vruble was not, however, obsessed or possessed by demons or any supernatural creature during the execution of his work, but that fact did not interest most of the Russian and Soviet researchers of the 20th century who elected to focus on the romanticization of the tragic circumstances of Vruble’s life rather than his artistic legacy.<sup>6</sup>

Archival material shows that Mikhail Vruble conceived the *Demoniana* series early in his career, years before he began work on the illustrations for the anniversary edition of Mikhail Lermontov’s poetry in 1890. Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) was a Russian poet and the greatest figure of Russian Romanticism in Russian literature. He left behind a corpus of poems, prose, and personal correspondence and was regarded as the founder of the tradition of the Russian psychological novel.<sup>7</sup> The year 1891 marked the 100th anniversary of Mikhail Lermontov’s birth and, to commemorate this date, a special issue of his work was printed with new illustrations commissioned from the most prominent painters of the time.

Mikhail Vruble chose to illustrate the poem “Demon” that Lermontov wrote from 1829-1839. Vruble’s first painting in the *Demoniana* cycle, *The Demon Seated*, had already been completed in 1890. This serves as evidence that, as early as this time in his career, Mikhail Vruble had envisioned a character that was very different in fate and image from other demon-like creatures created by his contemporaries and described in Lermontov’s poem.<sup>8</sup> The works more closely related to Vruble’s depiction of the Demon are those of the German symbolist painter Franz von Stuck (1863-1928) and the French artist Odilon Redon (1840-1916) (see fig. 1-3). But neither of these artists show the evolution of the Satan-like Lucifer or the ethereal angel in their work. Mikhail Vruble was adamant about producing an image that would change the intrinsic meaning of the character of the Demon. As luck would

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<sup>4</sup> Suzdalev, *Vruble’ and Lermontov*, 54.

<sup>5</sup> Hardiman and Kozicharov, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vruble’*, 2-10.

<sup>7</sup> Suzdalev, *Vruble’ and Lermontov*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Vruble, *Pisma sestre*, 167.

have it, he had the opportunity to explore this idea in his watercolor works and the commissioned illustrations. Mikhail Vrubel was hired along with other painters to illustrate several poems by Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov. Vrubel was tasked with illustrating the novel “A Hero of our time” and the poem “Demon.” During this time, he deepened the development of two different incarnations of the character of the Demon: one that closely followed the original character of Lermontov’s poem and his raw, unforgiving, destructive guise and one that Vrubel believed to be his own re-imagining of the Demon as a celestial creature that deserves and craves forgiveness.<sup>9</sup> This difference in interpretation consumed Mikhail Vrubel’s artistic ideas, as evidenced by the letters he wrote to his family and from this point onward. Until the point of his untimely death in 1910, Vrubel obsessively added more features to his character, the Demon, producing a series of paintings, sculptures, and pencil sketches related to this character. Mikhail Vrubel was a very productive painter and, in addition to his work on the *Demoniana* series, he also completed several major works of art that were heavily influenced by his obsession.<sup>10</sup>

To determine the specific characteristics of Vrubel’s Demon character, I have grouped Vrubel’s work by medium, into one group with his paintings and another with his illustrations and watercolor, pencil sketches. The paintings and the illustrations informed and inspired each other, and this method of grouping helps to differentiate between the two perceptions Vrubel had of his main character. It will be beneficial to demonstrate that in addition to the time spent on commissioned works, Vrubel devoted a significant amount of time to the *Demoniana* series, producing pencil sketches and watercolors for his vision. This thesis seeks to answer the following research question: how did Mikhail Vrubel change the core meaning of demonic nature with his main character, the Demon? In order to answer this, the changes Vrubel made to his illustrated series and sketches, in the paintings must be studied. Additionally, it is necessary to reexamine the literary foundation for the chosen theme and the overall conception of demonic and fantastic creatures in European art at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel*, 118.

<sup>10</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel and Lermontov*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Howard, *Art Nouveau*, 10-50.

## 1.2. Contents and thesis framework

This thesis consists of an introduction, two main chapters, and a conclusion. The second chapter is devoted to investigating the context surrounding Vrubel's *Demoniana* cycle. In the first section of this chapter, I explore biographical data in order to accurately place the objects of art on the timeline of Mikhail Vrubel's life. It is particularly important to touch upon the biographical peculiarities of Mikhail Vrubel's early childhood, as well as the impact of his time spent learning under Pavel Chistyakov (1832-1919) and of Chistyakov's unique sense of style and painting methods. This biographical framework highlights the important life events that coincided with the production of Vrubel's *Demoniana* cycle, thus developing an understanding of the context for his painted and drawn works of art.

In the second section of the second chapter, I give an overview of the aesthetic style known as the Russian Modern style, or Art Nouveau in Russia, as well as an overview of the symbolist movement and the Art Nouveau style across Europe. This framework showcases the place of Mikhail Vrubel's art in contemporary and stylistic correlation with the aesthetic of that time.<sup>12</sup>

The next section of the second chapter is devoted to Mikhail Lermontov's poem, "Demon," which was written between 1829 and 1839 and first published in 1842. It is important to touch upon the poem itself and its critique of the time, as Mikhail Vrubel was no doubt aware of this critique. I describe the plot of the poem and the outcome of the characters and their fates. Even though Vrubel made the painted Demon quite different from the poem's Demon, they share a common history and Vrubel's representations share some imagery. In the minds of contemporary researchers and most museum audiences, Lermontov's Demon and Mikhail Vrubel are intrinsically linked.<sup>13</sup>

The third chapter of this thesis is devoted to a complete analysis of the *Demoniana* cycle and uses a formalist approach to describe and analyze the paintings and illustrations in the first two sections of the chapter. I touch upon the technique that Mikhail Vrubel used and apply some scholarly literature to the

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<sup>12</sup> Hardiman and Kozicharov, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Benois, 'Vrubel', 175–82.

analysis of the paintings. The next section uses a framework derived from iconological methods to highlight the metaphors and symbolism in the *Demoniana* cycle. In this part, I will employ historiographical methods to show how the contemporary Art Nouveau style influenced Vrubel to search for the right imagery.<sup>14</sup> A comparative analysis of the paintings, watercolors, and murals is used in the last section to showcase that the *Demoniana* series was ever-present in the works that Mikhail Vrubel presented to the public even though the concept was sometimes very far from the fantastic world that he had created.<sup>15</sup> The last part of the analysis concludes with the finding of this thesis and with the answers to the research questions stated in the introduction of this thesis.

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<sup>14</sup> German, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel*, 55.



### 1.3. Methodology and theoretical framework.

In order to fully answer my research questions, I use a combination of different art history theories and methods. I have selected these particular theories and methods because of the complexity of the material and based on the theoretical practices of modern art history that are accepted in research.<sup>16</sup> Even though some methodologies may overlap, it is important to show that they can be applied to Mikhail Vrubel's artistic legacy and provide evidence of concepts expressed in some recent research or ignite discussion of new hypotheses for future study. I believe it is important to examine the work in the context of its time, that is to say, in the context of the world in which it was created. I pay significant attention to the creator's motivations and imperatives that are evident from historical data and personal statements. With the consideration of iconography and symbols, I create a framework that shows the incorporation of the concept of the *Demoniana* series throughout Mikhail Vrubel's oeuvre. I start with the most common method of biography to convey the context of Vrubel's work.

I use biographical or autobiographical analysis in my research because it helps define the details of the artist's life in order to infer meaning in their work, creating an understanding of the context of its creation. Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) was a pioneer of the biographical method. Some would even say he was the inventor of this type of methodology in art history. Indeed, Vasari's *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* was published in 1550 and offers a group portrait of the artists of the Italian Renaissance, starting with Cimabue in the 13th century and culminating 300 years later with Michelangelo.<sup>17</sup>

In the first chapter of this thesis, I introduce biographical information on Mikhail Vrubel that previous scholars have discovered.<sup>18</sup> I have examined historical records of exhibitions held in Saint Petersburg, Kyiv, Moscow, and Paris.<sup>19</sup> I have also examined some personal letters of Mikhail Vrubel to and from his father, sister, and wife, correspondence between Mikhail Vrubel and his teachers and fellow artists, as

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<sup>16</sup> Elkins, *Stories of Art*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters*, Vol. 1-10.

<sup>18</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, 118-155.

<sup>19</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel' and Lermontov*; Yaremich, Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel'*.

well as some memoirs of his patrons.<sup>20</sup> This information sheds light on Mikhail Vrubel as a person and on the circumstances in which he lived. I mainly focus on historical background information and the development of the art scene in Saint Petersburg at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>21</sup> The artistic climate explored is presented to show how immensely unique Vrubel's style was from his contemporaries and how his art was received by patrons. Understanding the changes that Mikhail Vrubel underwent in his personal life and his quest for artistic freedom is important to fully appreciate Vrubel's production of the *Demoniana* cycle.

The biographical part of this research is largely founded on diaries of Mikhail Vrubel, his letters to his sister Anna (1855-1928), and general correspondence with various painter friends, contemporaries, and patrons.<sup>22</sup> It is hard to reconstruct Mikhail Vrubel's character but there are some clues about his temperament in some surviving letters that he wrote himself and second-hand descriptions from his friends.<sup>23</sup>

One can argue that Vrubel was completely entranced with the aesthetic of Art Nouveau. To conceptualize this discussion, I draw from autobiographical material in which Vrubel explains the reasoning behind the changes he is making to his ultimate hero—the Demon. He is interested in deconstructing the “demon” figure from the Lucifer side to the humanized version of Lermontov's poem to the angelic form that Vrubel himself still sees in this character. Vrubel later admitted that he was “possessed” by the idea and that this led to his misfortunes, which, in turn, made him contemplate the ending for his *Demoniana*. This contemplation resulted in a complete transformation of the Demon into the six-winged Seraph. This material shows how much of what Mikhail Vrubel wrote described his mental state and how it can be explored in the framework of the *Demoniana* cycle. It also sheds light on the religious crisis that Mikhail Vrubel experienced later in life when working on the murals for St. Cyril's Church in Kyiv, much of the imagery of which served as a stepping stone for the creation of the *Demoniana* series.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, 43-155.

<sup>21</sup> Sternin, *Hudozhestvennaya zhiizn' Rossii*, 35-56.

<sup>22</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, 191-277.

<sup>23</sup> Korovin, *Memuari Konstantina Korovina*, 66-74.

<sup>24</sup> Isdebsky-Pritchard, *The Art of Mikhail Vrubel*, 33.

In the third chapter of this thesis, I use a formalist approach to Mikhail Vrubel's various painted works and watercolors, as well as some of his sculptures and sketches. I consider the form of the artworks and describe their purely visual characteristics. I derive the methodology mostly from the works of Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) and Alois Riegl (1858–1905).<sup>25</sup> In addition to adhering to the methodology of these art historian titans, I analyze the composition, color scheme, and dynamics within the imagery that form the non-representational art that Mikhail Vrubel created.<sup>26</sup>

Mikhail Vrubel was an artist truly ahead of his time, using techniques and methods that were more characteristic of the 20th century.<sup>27</sup> It is evident that Vrubel was not imitating an object found in nature in his *Demoniana*. He was, however, inspired by real nature and used different techniques to add a unique fantasy, dreamlike quality to his paintings. This is why I argue that even though his imagery is fantastical, the execution of the paintings in the *Demoniana* series is completely realistic. It also borders on the pathway to expressionistic painting because of the pronounced expression of the artist's feelings, longings, and aspirations, conveying a search for ideals of beauty and form through the downfall and resurrection of the Demon. By comparing individual paintings to each other, I can determine style distinctions and the conceptual difference between Vrubel's painted series of the *Demoniana* and his illustrations for the Lermontov edition. I consider the description part of this research to be helpful in discussing Vrubel's artistic heritage and the formal characteristics of styles that he merged in his paintings. This is also necessary because some of the works have been severely damaged and no longer possess the qualities that they originally had. A formal analysis is fundamental when writing about the *Demoniana* series because of the specificity of Vrubel's portrayal of his main character. To present a comprehensive view of Vrubel's oeuvre, I use an iconographic approach that considers the meaning and the subject matter in the work. Erwin Panofsky's (1892-1968) essay, "Iconography and Iconology," was originally published in 1939 as the introduction to the book *Study in Iconology*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Wölfflin, *Classic Art*; Riegl, Binstock and Jung. *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*.

<sup>26</sup> Hardiman and Kozicharov, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, 52.

<sup>27</sup> Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History*, 78-99.

<sup>28</sup> Lavin and Panofsky. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 28-45.

Panofsky was concerned, above all, with the meaning, subject matter, and the content of works of art. This was in reaction to what he and his associates perceived to be too great a preoccupation with the formal qualities of objects in the early decades of the 20th century.<sup>29</sup> In his early work, Panofsky also expanded on the theories of Riegl but eventually became more preoccupied with iconography and, in particular, with the transmission of themes related to classical antiquity in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.<sup>30</sup> In *Studies in Iconology*, Panofsky detailed his idea of three levels of art-historical understanding. The first level is the primary or natural subject matter, which is a basic formalist approach to art, a figure sitting. The second level is the secondary or conventional subject matter, in which we can go deeper and bring in some context or iconographic knowledge, for example, a seated demon-like figure overlooking a fantastic landscape. The third and final level is the tertiary or intrinsic meaning or content. This level makes it possible to take into account the personal, technical, and cultural histories that pertain to the understanding of the image in front of us.<sup>31</sup>

In this thesis, I draw upon Erwin Panofsky's iconological method of analysis for the *Demoniana* series, both the illustrated and painted parts. Considering Vrubel's obsession with Late Byzantine art and his work with the St. Cyril's Church, I draw attention to the symbolic role of images that Vrubel has chosen to represent in his paintings. Having already discussed the formal characteristics, this adds another layer to the overall deconstruction of the works so that I can then consider different dates and personal circumstances in Mikhail Vrubel's life. An iconographic analysis should focus on the representative iconography of a work and take into account the symbolic role of images, the historical or mythological identity of figures, and any other elements that may have a visual significance. My iconographical analysis of the *Demoniana* series focuses on the particular design elements of the imagery of the Demon himself. Through a close reading of the elements of the facial structure, body build and movement, and hair placement, it becomes possible to trace their lineage,

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<sup>29</sup> Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 171.

<sup>31</sup> Lavin and Panofsky. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 163.

and draw conclusions regarding the origins and trajectory of these motifs, like the murals of St. Cyril's Church and other paintings by Mikhail Vrubel.<sup>32</sup>

To explain the dichotomy present in Vrubel's Demon figure that was very different from the "demon" or "Satan" characteristics that the contemporary culture read into his work, I use the semiotics framework developed by Roland Barthes.<sup>33</sup> Semiotics is concerned with how meaning is created in language and, in this case, in an art form or images. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) states that connoted and denoted meanings are paramount to the examination of images and the interpretation of them depends on several key concepts. It is important to provide identification of denoted meaning, the recognition of the visual sign created, and the connoted meaning that provides the instant cultural associations that come with the recognition of the image.<sup>34</sup> Semiotics operates under the notion that an image can only be understood from the viewer's perspective.<sup>35</sup>

The historical framework of Vrubel's time is provided from archival material: memoirs and diaries of his contemporaries, providing historical context of the work in question. Additionally, the overall view of philosophical thought at the time of the creation of the *Demoniana* series is brought to light. Authors such as Elena Blavatsky (1831-1891)<sup>36</sup> were extremely popular in the art world, and even though Vrubel himself was highly spiritual (leaning toward the Orthodox tradition), he could not help but be swept into the mania of searching for demons, angels, fairies, and spiritual beings walking in the daylight.<sup>37</sup> His collection of paintings was heavily influenced by the folklore tradition of the east. Paintings like *Princess Swan*, *Bogatyr*, and *Morning* were a vivid representation of the Arts and Crafts movement in Russia. As semiotic art history seeks to uncover the codified meaning or meanings in the aesthetic object, it is appropriate to use this method in the discussion of Mikhail Vrubel's work by trying to determine what connections his work has with the collective consciousness of that time.

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<sup>32</sup> Dmitrieva, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 64,

<sup>33</sup> Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, 17-36.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*.

<sup>37</sup> Hardiman and Kozicharov, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, 44.

#### 1.4. Materials and sources

My primary material consists of Vrubel's paintings, watercolors, pencil sketches and murals. To use them as source material for my arguments, I use the commonly known art historical approach of describing and analyzing the paintings, illustrated works, murals, and sculptures in question. I describe the visual in detail in order to highlight the importance of one trait over the other. For example, Vrubel frequently used his own image as a base for his character's face.<sup>38</sup>

It is important to stress that since many of the pieces are over 100 years old, they have sustained some damage over the years, and this has influenced the analysis of researchers working in the later part of the 20th century. For example, the paint that Vrubel used on his "Fallen Demon" had a bronze inlay that darkened over time and was not evident to the naked eye before restoration began.<sup>39</sup> In the case of watercolors and monochrome drawings, they have also been susceptible to the passing of the time and have faded somewhat. This is important because such details can be easily overlooked in the overall stylistic analysis, but they are important to the complete comprehension of the piece and its subsequent interpretation.

I have examined Vrubel's paintings at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the State Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg. I have also accessed the original illustrations for the poem "Demon" by Lermontov at the State Art History Library in Moscow and seen the sketches of the murals in Saint Cyril Church from the archive of the 19th-century Graphics Department at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The number of paintings dealt with in this study is quite large and they cannot all be adequately reproduced in the appendices. However, I will provide notes or links to publicly accessible images or reproductions whenever possible.

The two main primary historical and literary sources are archival material, such as memoirs and personal correspondence of Mikhail Vrubel, as well as the text of the poem, "Demon," by Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov.<sup>40</sup> I will use the personal diaries of Mikhail Vrubel, his family members, his sister Anna, and his contemporaries and friends, such as the painter Konstantin Korovin (1861-1939),

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<sup>38</sup> Vrubel, *Pisma sestre*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Durylin, 'Vrubel' i Lermontov', 594.

<sup>40</sup> Lermontov, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, Vol.2., 3-20.

Valentin Serov (1865-1911) and others, among them their painting teacher and friend Pavel Petrovich Chistyakov (1832-1919) and, in the later years, his physician Fyodor Arsenevich Usoltsev (1863-1947).<sup>41</sup> All the aforementioned material was reprinted in a book called "Vrubel. Letters and memoirs about the artist" by Eleonora Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia in 1963 in Leningrad, Russia. A separate volume consisting of Anna Vrubel's letters was also used and is listed in the bibliography at the end of this thesis.

I will devote a section of the second chapter to Mikhail Vrubel's place in the changing art scene of his time, his influence on his contemporaries and artistic rivals, and the impact he made on the world of art history. By collecting data from the personal correspondence of Mikhail Vrubel's contemporaries that discusses Vrubel, his work ethic and style, and the contracts and private commissions he was awarded, I present a comprehensive view of the work Vrubel has done before, after, and during the time he worked on his *Demoniana* series.

The other textual data is the text of the poem "Demon" which was a lifelong work-in-progress for Mikhail Lermontov.<sup>42</sup> Officially, the final version was published in 1842, but the dates of creation range from 1829–1839. The poem is considered a masterpiece of European Romantic poetry and is set in the Caucasus Mountains that Mikhail Lermontov loved dearly, the striking landscape almost serving as a backdrop for the drama. The character of the Demon is a fallen angel that roams the earth in isolation, burdened by his unlimited power and loneliness<sup>43</sup>.

Now that I have outlined the basic principles of this thesis and the framework within which I am operating, I turn now to the body of this thesis.

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<sup>41</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, 270-73.

<sup>42</sup> Liukkonen, "Mikhail (Yuryevich) Lermontov", 3.

<sup>43</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel' and Lermontov*, 14.

## 2. The contextual background Mikhail Vruble's *Demoniana* series

In this chapter, I draw upon the historical context surrounding the creation of the *Demoniana* cycle, Mikhail Vruble's artistic journey, and the alleged literary source material for the series. As I explore the biographical material, I focus on the distinct time of the creation of the pieces relevant to this study. It is important to touch upon the biographical peculiarities of Mikhail Vruble's early childhood, as well as the impact of Vruble's time spent studying under Pavel Petrovich Chistyakov on Mikhail Vruble's development as a painter.<sup>44</sup> The second part of this chapter consists of an overview of the Art Nouveau style in Russia and some general comments about the time of fin-de-siècle epoch in European art and the attitude toward "demonic" subjects. This will be an attempt to place Mikhail Vruble's art in temporary and stylistic correlation with the aesthetic of that time in Russian and European art.<sup>45</sup> The third part of this chapter explores Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov's "Demon" as a conditional literary source for the *Demoniana* series and the important differences that Mikhail Vruble implemented in his series. It is important to discuss the poem itself and its critique of the time.<sup>46</sup> Even though Vruble made his painted Demon quite different from Lermontov's Demon, they do share a common history and, subsequently, have shared fame, intrinsically linked in the minds of the audiences today.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Chistyakov, *Pisma, memuari*, 50.

<sup>45</sup> Sternin, *Ot Repina Do Vrubelia*, 87.

<sup>46</sup> Suzdalev, *Vruble' and Lermontov*, 21-33.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



## 2.1. Mikhail Vrubel's life and artistic career

Mikhail Vrubel was born on March 5, 1856, in Omsk, Russia into the family of a military lawyer. His father was Alexander Mikhailovich Vrubel and his mother was Anna Grigorievna Basargina. Anna Basargina died during Mikhail's infancy and, as a result, the boy was raised by his stepmother and sister, Anna. Misha (short for Mikhail) was a happy child, with interests in music (his stepmother Elizaveta Khistoforovna Vessel', was a professional pianist) and in geology and the structure of minerals. In this hobby, many experts see the roots of the inimitable style of the master and the so-called "faceted" painting.<sup>48</sup>

The boy's father, Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vrubel, wanted his son to pursue a career in law and sent him to study at the Saint Petersburg University in the Faculty of Law. During his years of studying law at the university, Mikhail Vrubel was already interested in the arts and took extracurricular evening drawing classes at the Royal Academy of Arts.<sup>49</sup> He was one of the fortunate students of Pavel Petrovich Chistyakov, who taught in the Academy during the years 1861 through 1893.<sup>50</sup> The influence of Pavel Chistyakov's teaching was tremendous on the young painters of that time. He taught Valentin Alexandrovich Serov, Konstantin Alexeevich Korovin, and Alexander Yakovlevich Golovin (1863-1930), to name just a few.<sup>51</sup> The tradition of realism in painting and precise drawing methods were key elements of Pavel Chistyakov's method and even though Vrubel is usually regarded as one of the painters of the symbolist movement, the training he received equipped him for very realistic work.

While training at the Academy, Vrubel earned the flattering nickname of "Fortuny" in honor of the Spanish artist Mariano Fortuny (1871-1949), known for his watercolor technique.<sup>52</sup> The cult of Fortuny was quite literally all over Pavel Chistyakov's workshop. Young artists were attracted first and foremost to his ability to create a form out of color patches. During these preparatory years, Vrubel adopted and further developed his painterly technique. It consisted of fragmented paint color

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<sup>48</sup> Sarabyaninov, *Vrubel'*, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel'*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> Chistyakov, *Pisma, memuari*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, 191-277.

<sup>52</sup> Chistyakov, *Pisma, memuari*, 76.

spots made with powerful and expressive brushstrokes, creating an image that looked as if its shape was woven of color contrasts, a unique method which later was called "faceted" painting.<sup>53</sup>

During his early academic work, Mikhail Vrubel excelled at book illustration. He illustrated Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), Goethe's *Faust* (1882), and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1883). Book illustration became somewhat of a playground in which Mikhail Vrubel could test his talents as a storyteller. He often used his own image as a base to draw characters, as was the case in his 1883 sketch of "Hamlet and Ophelia" that incorporated his face as the base of Hamlet. Some researchers see evidence of a continuing trend in which Mikhail Vrubel connected his own image to the characteristics of the heroes of his works.<sup>54</sup> They see evidence of this in the illustration work for the anniversary edition of Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov's poems (1891), an oeuvre I discuss a little further on in this chapter.

In 1884, at the recommendation of Pavel Chistyakov, Mikhail Vrubel was invited to work on the restoration of the 12th-century murals and mosaics at Saint Cyril's Church. This has served as a timestamp for the "Kyiv period" in the artist's life.<sup>55</sup> Mikhail Vrubel was then fortunate to be sponsored by Adrian Viktorovich Prakhov (1846-1916).<sup>56</sup> He went to Venice and studied medieval Christian and Byzantine art, as well as the art of the mosaic. The time that he spent in Venice studying the Byzantine style in 1884 made an imprint on Mikhail Vrubel's art for many years to come. It contributed to the naturalism of his imagery and made his paintings "glow" with a special luminescent painting technique. Researcher Pyotr Kirillovich Suzdalev (1918-1984) wrote about this change: "his palette acquired new strong saturated tones resembling the iridescent play of precious stones."<sup>57</sup>

Upon returning from Europe to Kyiv in 1886, Vrubel took part in a competition for the decoration of Saint Vladimir's Church but was turned down by the jury that preferred a more celebrated master, Victor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov (1848-1926). The committee saw Vrubel's work as too experimental and favored the

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<sup>53</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel and Lermontov*, 11-56.

<sup>55</sup> Kogan, *M. A. Vrubel*, 39.

<sup>56</sup> N. A. Prakhov, 'Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel', reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel*, p. 187.

<sup>57</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel and Lermontov*, 44.

more “traditional” and thus more acceptable work of Viktor Vasnetsov, who by then had gained recognition for his brilliant “fairytale-like” traditional Russian style of painting and decor.<sup>58</sup> Because he needed to work, Vrubel took part in the decorations nevertheless and we are left with some surviving sketches for the murals and some remaining actual decoration on the pillars of the cathedral with complex folklore-influenced designs.

It was during this time that the cycle of *Demoniana* was beginning to form as a concept in the painter’s mind, as Vrubel discussed this at length with his sister via mail.<sup>59</sup> Mikhail Vrubel was inspired by the opera *Demon* by Anton Grigorievich Rubinstein (1829-1894) and Mikhail Yurievich Lermontov’s poem “Demon,” both portraying a fallen angel eager to possess a mortal girl. However, it is clear at this early stage that, unlike his contemporaries, Vrubel did not see the Demon as the antagonist of the story.<sup>60</sup> Vrubel tried to project a storyline that was different from what Mikhail Lermontov’s *Demon* was after and, with this intention, the *Demoniana* cycle was born. The master was plotting something monumental and dramatic in content, as evidenced by his sketches and letter to his sister and father where he explained the differences between his character and the character of Demon from Mikhail Lermontov’s poem.<sup>61</sup>

During these years, he created three watercolors on the theme of Lermontov’s works, one of which was titled “Head of the Demon with mountains in the background” (1896). The artist also sculpted the Demon out of clay (1890), describing his efforts in its creation: “fashioned, it just might help the painting, because I’ll use it as a perfect model.”<sup>62</sup> According to contemporary accounts, he “sculpted” the Demon as a “strange head and strikingly similar to himself.”<sup>63</sup> To some extent, being commissioned to produce illustrations for the anniversary edition of Lermontov’s poetry collection came at a perfect time for Vrubel. In 1890, he painted *The Seated Demon* and a year later he was commissioned to do the illustrations for Ivan Kushnerev’s (1827-1896) lavishly decorated anniversary edition of Mikhail

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<sup>58</sup> Svechnikov, ‘Tvorchestvo V. M. Vasnetsova’, 3–19.

<sup>59</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel*, 109.

<sup>60</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel*, 27.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>63</sup> Korovin, *Memuari Konstantina Korovina*, 145.

Lermontov's best works, among them the poem "Demon."

It should be emphasized that Vrubel was a devoted admirer of Lermontov's literary work and considered it blasphemous to in any way distort the meaning of the poem.<sup>64</sup> Thus, he created a character for the illustrations that was mostly based on the poem, all the while meaning to change some of the details of the character when he produced his painted works. This prototype Demon develops the drama of Lermontov's hero in accordance with the peculiarities of Vrubel's intimate vision of the image. After he created the illustrations for the Lermontov edition, the painter deepened the character in his own *Demoniana*.

Some researchers define periods of life within Mikhail Vrubel's work<sup>65</sup> and the period when he came to Moscow in 1902 is considered to be the most fruitful for the master, and, probably, the happiest. The artist married a famous opera singer by the name of Nadezda Ivanovna Zabela (1868–1913), who sang in the private opera for one of Moscow's wealthiest men, Savva Mamontov (1841–1918). Mamontov took a personal interest in Vrubel's artistic career. Vrubel also traveled a lot during these years, both for study and leisure. During his travels, Vrubel created *Venice* (1893), as well as the painting *Spain* (1894). Around this time, he returned to the theme of Faust and produced a mural called *Flight of Faust and Mephistopheles* for the Gothic Cabinet in the Morozov House in Moscow (1896). He also painted the *Faust* triptych for Mamontov's house, depicting Faust, Margarita, and Mephistopheles and a student. He then painted the portrait of his patron Savva Mamontov in 1897.

Mikhail Vrubel became a part of the Arts and Crafts movement in Russia and spent time at Mamontov's private estate Abramtsevo, created especially for artistic *genius* of many artists to flourish as a part of the artistic circle called the "Abramtsevsky kruzhok," or the "Abramtsevo circle." During this time, Mikhail Vrubel became closely involved with theatre and decorative arts, creating ceramics, majolica, and stained-glass pieces. Vrubel worked on stage sets and costumes (for his wife, for example) and for Mamontov's private theatre and opera houses. Influenced by Russian fairy tales, he created some of his most acclaimed pieces including *Pan* (1899), the *Swan Princess* (1900), and *Lilacs* (1900). Another momentous occasion

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<sup>64</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 33-89.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

marked the Moscow period of Mikhail Vrubel's life—he became a father and named his son Savva, after his admired patron. In 1899, Vrubel returned to the “Demoniana” and completed the painting *The Demon in Flight*, and in 1902, he completed *The Demon Downcast*. In order to astound the public with the underlying message he was trying to convey through the *Demoniana* series, Vrubel repeatedly repainted the face of Demon even after the paintings were exhibited.<sup>66</sup> At the end of this struggle to find the perfect imagery for his hero, Vrubel suffered a severe nervous breakdown and was hospitalized in a psychiatric ward. It was at this time and after the sudden death of his only son that Mikhail Vrubel's life and career began a steady decline.<sup>67</sup> Most likely suffering from side effects of an untreated syphilis infection, the artist became violent and incohesive. His family decided to set him up in a mental institution under the care of a physician Fedor Arsenevich Usoltsev (1863-1947).<sup>68</sup>

In Vrubel's last period of creativity, 1903–1906, during the rare moments when he could work, he created several works devoted to the theme of prophets and angels: *Six-winged Seraph (Azrael)* (1904–1905), *John the Baptist* (1905), and *Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel* (1906). He also finished the painting *Portrait of Nadezda Vrubel against the background of birch trees* (1904), the pastel *Pearl* (1904), the drawing *Self-Portrait* (1904–1905), *Still Life* (1905), and *Portrait of the poet Bryusov* (1906). Being in a fragile mental state, Vrubel was obsessed with the thought that he was unworthy to paint the Holy Virgin and Christ, and, because of this Satan distorted everything he paints. When he was lucid, Vrubel produced exceptional exactly drawn still lifes, as well as portraits of fellow patients, his caretakers, and his doctors. In 1906, Vrubel was overpowered by mental disease and approaching blindness, so he gave up painting. In 1910, Mikhail Vrubel died from pneumonia.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel' and Lermontov*, 78.

<sup>67</sup> Shumskiy, *Vrubel: zhizn' i bolezni*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, 270-73.

<sup>69</sup> Blok, “Pamyati Vrubel'ia.”, 307–09.

## 2.2. Historical context and the place of Mikhail Vrubel's *Demoniana* series in European art of the 19th and 20th centuries

The flowering of creativity of Mikhail Vrubel fell upon the complex and contradictory era of the turn of the 20th century. His activities fit into the chronological framework from the beginning of 1880 until 1905. It was a time when the prevailing sentiment in society was a premonition of coups, the expectations of “unprecedented change, unprecedented riots.”<sup>70</sup>

It does not come as a surprise, of course, because the aesthetic and philosophical thought of the fin-de-siècle epoch was keen on portraying all things as mystical, symbolic, and enigmatic. Concepts of symbolism were integrated into the arts through literature. The style is believed to originate from Charles Baudelaire's (1821-1867) *Les fleur de mal*, published in 1857 and later developed by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) and Paul Verlaine (1844-1896).<sup>71</sup> The term “symbolist” was derived from the Latin *symbolum*, meaning a symbol of faith and recognition, which, in turn, originated from Greek σύμβολον, or *symbolon*, meaning an object that was cut in half, constituting a sign of recognition if reassembled. The symbolist movement in literature rejected realism and naturalism, attaching symbolic meaning to certain words and objects. In a nutshell, as Mallarmé wrote in a letter to his friend Henri Cazalis (1840-1909), the symbolist movement intended “to depict not the thing but the effect it produces.”<sup>72</sup>

It is important to note that Mikhail Vrubel was indeed influenced by the contemporary musings of his time. A society so well connected to the European art scene as the Royal Court of Imperial Russia was no doubt aware of the contemporary religious and spiritual movements. Many of Mikhail Vrubel's contemporaries dabbled in mysticism and spiritual seances, just as was fashionable in the high societies in Vienna and Paris.<sup>73</sup> Under the influence of Lermontov's poetic genius and his own discovery of the style of the Byzantine era, Vrubel came to an understanding that his character was different conceptually to those satanic creatures that Western

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<sup>70</sup> Sarabyaninov, *Vrubel'*, 114.

<sup>71</sup> Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs Du Mal*, 11.

<sup>72</sup> Conway, "The Elusive Symbolist movement", 16.

<sup>73</sup> Hardiman and Kozicharov, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, 52.

Catholic Church had created in its imagery since the Middle Ages.<sup>74</sup> Mikhail Vrubel was adamant about the need to stay away from the perception of the Demon as an evil character, as a sinner without hope. This is the core issue when it comes to his concept of the *Demoniana*. Mikhail Vrubel derived the image for the Demon from another source, an angelic order, what the Greeks called “daemon,” or the “soul.”<sup>75</sup> Combining these two concepts in his *Demoniana* series, Mikhail Vrubel created an evolution of the character of the Demon in a visual form.

As a reaction against the naturalism and realism that was so prominent in the arts movement in the middle of the 19th century, the symbolist movement in the arts was born.<sup>76</sup> Heavily influenced by theosophy and spiritualism, both very popular metaphysical schools of thought in the late 19th century, symbolism quickly adapted the romantic tradition of the late 19th century. Some artists viewed it as a revival of the mystical tendencies set by the earlier age of romantic quests and spiritual awakening.<sup>77</sup> Geographically, symbolism in art was more widespread than in literature and artists like Franz von Stuck (1863-1928), Odilon Redon (1840-1916), Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), Edvard Munch (1863-1944), Jan Toorop (1858-1928) and Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) are considered to be adepts of this movement. Their paintings were influenced by the literary sources of various historical times and were, in many ways, loyal to their own mythological and dream imagery, all the while using methods of representative art to convey symbolist meaning in art. The symbols used by these artists were not mainstream iconography but instead intensely personal, private, and obscure, sometimes ambiguous in reference due to the exotic nature of their provenance.<sup>78</sup> Along with its interest in the creation of a new form, symbolism in painting paired coherently with the contemporary Art Nouveau style with its obsession with nature, flowing and shining textures, appropriation of different techniques, and general inspiration of a newly created, fantastic and magical world.<sup>79</sup> As part of the magical realm, a brief but very ubiquitous obsession

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<sup>74</sup> Hardiman and Kozicharov, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, 53.

<sup>75</sup> German, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel*, 24.

<sup>76</sup> Conway, "The Elusive Symbolist movement", 16.

<sup>77</sup> Dmitrieva, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 34.

<sup>78</sup> Allenov, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 87.

<sup>79</sup> Hardiman and Kozicharov, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, 41-53.

with finding fairies and creatures of the fairy realm was introduced in the 19th-century school of thought.<sup>80</sup>

As a highly gifted artist, Vrubel, in his own way, belongs to each of the artistic directions of this period. He was both a symbolist and realist with skills of deep research into character. This is why his lifetime oeuvre of the *Demoniana* series proves to be such a complex topic for research.

The Russian society of that time was in the process of changing. The character of the medieval spirit of rebellion, protest, and defiance had been interpreted as the human right of choice. It was also a question of the religious search for many bright minds of that time and it seems probable that the character of the ancient image of Lucifer, the antagonist of God, would become the bearer of the rebellious feelings of the open-minded elite. Thus, it came as no surprise that in art, especially in poetry, the character of the "noble seducer" became associated with a proud symbol of the human spirit, rebelling against the canon of the understanding of good and evil.<sup>81</sup> However, the new moral concepts have yet to unfold; they are vague and shaky. Demon, the ultimate theomachist, rebelled against all despoticisms and is eager to complete his knowledge and freedom, but to reach freedom, he must enter into an empty and cold space of eternity, doomed to futility and an unquenchable yearning of the spirit.<sup>82</sup>

The human imagination in the image of the Demon created by Vrubel captured the painful and difficult path of the moral and intellectual quest of a subtle soul. In this process of liberation from the power of dogma, the idea of the "evil spirit" that had been reinvented to the extent of acceptance by society was present in many other works. The desire to express the broad concept of the era was driven by artists from different countries. But using the image of the demon for translating the big ideas of the time occurred only to Vrubel, partly influenced by his familiarity with Lermontov's "Demon." In foreign art, the demonic theme had a fundamentally different interpretation. The German symbolist Franz von Stuck (1863-1928) performed his *Lucifer* in 1890 in the same year that Vrubel created his *The Seated*

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<sup>80</sup> Bown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-century Art and Literature*, 47-89.

<sup>81</sup> Sarabyaninov, *Vrubel*, 189.

<sup>82</sup> Allenov, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 45.



*Demon*. But the demon of Franz von Stuck was frankly an evil spirit that combined its look and features with the academic naturalism of the Jugendstil. There is no doubt that this was an evil creature with glowing "fire" with its eyes, a "suffering and sorrowful spirit," carrying death and destruction. Another example of adhering to this standard imagery is in the work of French Symbolist Odilon Redon (1840-1916). His works *Fallen Angel* and *Angel of Destiny* were produced from 1890 to 1895 and the images were similar to Vrubel's *Demon*, but only in some ways. Banished from Paradise, the Angel looks back, ugly, weighed down by heavy wings, symbolizing evil rather than the ability to feel grief, frustration, or other feelings. A similar "decorative" approach was taken by Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) in his painting *The Chimera* (1867), with the angel-like creature whisking away a young woman, only to reveal that his feet are transforming into a snake, the symbol of the original sin (see fig.4). This piece reminds us of the pre-Raphaelite tradition and paints the angelic creature as a sinner, rather than a rescuer. Hugo Simberg's (1873-1917) 1903 rendition, *Wounded Angel*, shows a complete dissection of the symbol of heaven, exposing the forceful influence of Arnold Böcklin's (1827-1901) art (see fig.5).

### 2.3. Exploring Mikhail Lermontov's poem "Demon" as the literary source of the "Demoniana" cycle

As already established, the poem written by Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov was partially a source for the *Demoniana* series. Vrubel's *Demoniana* was, in part, based on the concept of the character produced by Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) in his poem "Demon."<sup>83</sup> The poem was first published in 1856, but the Demon was always the central character of Lermontov's poetic world. The poet worked on the poem for almost ten years, from 1829 until 1841, creating at least six different versions of the text.<sup>84</sup> The poem was originally set in Spain, later, but Lermontov later moved its setting to his beloved region of the Caucasus mountains.<sup>85</sup>

"Demon" was, admittedly, only one poem in Mikhail Lermontov's oeuvre, but it was much more than a single poem. Most traits of the demon character are explicitly or implicitly present in all the works of Lermontov. In his early poems, the Demon is a reflection of the confused young soul and, in time, the Demon grows stronger and more belligerent until it becomes the alter ego of the poet.<sup>86</sup> By confronting his own personal "demons," Lermontov created a poetic image that helped him mirror his way of thinking about the universe and his purpose in it. It was the image of the tragic rebel doomed to eternal loneliness, protesting vulgarity and despotism, against the existing order of things.<sup>87</sup>

Mikhail Lermontov was an important figure in the romantic era of 19th century Russia. He was referred to as "the moon of Russian poetry," highlighting his difference from the "sun," or Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin (1799-1837), but also rendering him just as important as his famous contemporary.<sup>88</sup> Lermontov drew inspiration from the poetry of his predecessors, as did Vrubel, turning to the works of Dante Alighieri (?-1321), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Lord George Gordon Byron (1788-1824), Walter Scott (1771-1832), William Blake (1757-1827), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), Dante

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<sup>83</sup> Liukkonen, "Mikhail (Yuryevich) Lermontov", 11.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel' and Lermontov*, 10-34.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Dmitrieva, *Mikhail Vrubel'*, 33.

<sup>88</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel' and Lermontov*, 26.

Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). Alexander Pushkin was the idol of both artists, but Mikhail Vrubel also had the fortune of being acquainted with the works of Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881).<sup>89</sup>

The poem opens with the protagonist, hopeless and troubled spirit, restlessly roaming the earth. The Demon is tired of his isolation and stumbles upon a Georgian traditional wedding ceremony, there he glimpses the dance of the bride – a young girl named Tamara. The Demon decides to seduce the girl and kills her groom. He then proceeds to court her, and she falls completely under his spell, unable to refuse him. However, his kiss is fatal to a mortal woman and the Demon knows this. Subsequently he kills Tamara and as the Angel takes her soul away, the Demon is left "*Alone in all the universe, Abandoned, without love or hope!*"<sup>90</sup>

Researchers generally agree that Lermontov's interpretation of the Demon shows a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, we have the symbolic image of the philosophical and moral questions of the moods of Mikhail Lermontov himself. On the other hand, we have the image of the anti-Christ in his evangelical connotation, an evil spirit who cannot redeem himself and attain salvation through love, only possessing a "brutal intent" for corrupting pure innocent souls.<sup>91</sup> This duality is a result of the incompatibility of the predominant image of the hero and the simultaneous resemblance to the character of Christian demonology as a reflection of the contradictory and complex inner world of the poet. It seems that Lermontov himself is not sure about the essence of his hero. In all three phases of the poem, the reader is forced to wonder what purpose the Demon serves—does he seek revenge or redemption?<sup>92</sup>

It should be noted that illustrations made by Vrubel for Lermontov's poem display the usual interpretation of the Demon. Vrubel presented Lermontov's demon as an evil spirit but on a completely different level. Vrubel wrote to his sister that he wanted to paint "something demonic."<sup>93</sup> Mikhail Vrubel was undoubtedly influenced

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<sup>89</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 11.

<sup>90</sup> Lermontov, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, Vol.2., 4.

<sup>91</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel' and Lermontov*, 44.

<sup>92</sup> German, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel*, 77.

<sup>93</sup> Vrubel, *Pisma sestre*, 34.

by the contemporary musings of his time. Under the influence of Lermontov's poetic genius and his own discovery of the style of the Byzantine era, Vrubel came to the understanding that his character was conceptually different from the satanic creatures prevalent in the imagery of the Western Catholic Church. Mikhail Vrubel was adamant about staying away from the perception of the Demon as an evil character, as a sinner without hope. This was the core issue when it came to his concept of the *Demoniana*.<sup>94</sup> Mikhail Vrubel derived his image for the Demon from another source, an angelic order, what the Greeks called "daemon" or "soul." Combining the two concepts in his *Demoniana* series, Mikhail Vrubel created an evolution of the character of the Demon in a visual form. The biographical framework and exploration of the literary origin of Mikhail Lermontov's poem, aligned with the important life events that coincided with the production of Vrubel's *Demoniana* cycle, create a contextual framework for Vrubel's painted works and illustrations that will be analyzed in detail in the next chapter of this thesis.

During the 1880s and 1890s, Lermontov's work took on new urgency. His work attracted the attention of readers, critics, writers, and poets. Many found his work to be a source of support for overcoming pessimistic moods, and others found in it the strength to protest against the injustices of the existing reality. Others believed that the value of Lermontov's work lied in its ability to look into the eternal and in its high human values. Whatever it was, the new appreciation of Lermontov that began 1890 was linked with the consciousness of the younger generation, and Pyotr Konchalovsky (1839-1904), in his enthusiasm for the poet, exhibited remarkable open-mindedness and sensitivity to new trends, which led to the creation of the anniversary edition of Lermontov's work that was edited by Ivan Nikolaevich Kushnerev and his team.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> German, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel*, 87.

<sup>95</sup> Sarabyaninov, *Vrubel*, 44.

### 3. Analysis of the origins Mikhail Vrubel's *Demoniana* series

#### 3.1. Mikhail Vrubel's painting style

Mikhail Vrubel is mostly known as a symbolist artist and this is true to some extent.<sup>96</sup> He made a career creating fantastic imagery of magical creatures, infusing them with symbols, allegories, and metaphors. However, I believe that, at heart, this painter was deeply dedicated to an academic approach to his art. Mikhail Vrubel's art can, perhaps, be considered as truly symbolist on a literary level, as his inspiration for the ideas of his creations came from literature and folklore.<sup>97</sup> However, by his own standards, Vrubel deliberately stood aloof from contemporary art trends, drawing inspiration from Late Byzantine and Early Renaissance paintings, and adjusting their aesthetic to a more realistic approach in his murals and decorative panel work.<sup>98</sup> Vrubel liked to say that a painting should be created "not fit with trembling hands but with quiet determination and craftsmanship."<sup>99</sup> Therefore, it cannot be said that any image he produced was accidental or not thought through thoroughly.

One of Vrubel's great artistic achievements is his easily recognizable and highly decorative style. In an effort to better transmit the images onto the canvas, Vrubel used not only the traditional shading of colored objects but also unusual varieties in their form, using the spatula as a brush.<sup>100</sup> Faces, hands, and clothes were broken up into many small bumps, hues, edges, and angles, together forming a whole. By destroying the nature of the object, breaking each form down into pieces, and digging deep to uncover the hidden qualities of each subject, Vrubel had the opportunity to preserve and unravel all the secrets that the object or the subject of his painting held. This was possible because Vrubel was highly dedicated to portraying "the truth of life" in art.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Allenov, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 87.

<sup>97</sup> Hardiman and Kozicharov, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, 48.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 77.

<sup>100</sup> Korovin, *Memuari Konstantina Korovina*, 56.

<sup>101</sup> Vrubel, *Pisma sestree*, 27.

Konstantin Korovin also remembered what Vrubel said about his approach to art: *“Yes, I see it in front of me and draw, as if it were from nature. You must see it in your own way and should be able to draw it. Do not copy, but draw, create the form, aware of the complexity of this method of work.”*<sup>102</sup>

According to the recollections of Valentin Serov, Mikhail Vrubel used a photograph of some mountains and some lunar, fantastical landscape images<sup>103</sup> when he created sketches for the *Demoniana* series. The so-called “faceted” technique became one of the artist’s favorite techniques and it was evident here. Because of this technique, Vrubel was able to draw up a concept piece in pencil and then transport it into oil paintings and watercolors, creating a mosaic with a “carpet-like” layout smear.<sup>104</sup>

A few contemporary accounts survived with a description of Mikhail Vrubel’s painting technique. Yanovsky recalled that Vrubel *“worked extremely quickly. This is because he embarks upon the final execution only when all the smallest details have already clearly formed in his mind.”*<sup>105</sup> This would explain the number of sketches he drew for the “Demon” and the fact that Mikhail Vrubel would not show his painting to anyone until it was complete.<sup>106</sup> He was also adamant that his art was “completed” before showing to the public. In the case of *The Demon Downcast*, Vrubel added last-minute alterations just days before the opening of the exhibition.<sup>107</sup>

In his memoirs, Konstantin Korovin gave an account of how Vrubel worked on the illustrations for Kushnerev edition:

*Mikhail Aleksandrovich took cardboard backed with paper, ink, and a brush, and I saw him squint, as if taking aim, or anything featuring, cutting in different places on the board, putting staccato touches, thin, straight, and with the same margin they are connected. Then find the eyes, below the carpet, left bars in the middle ear, etc. and so it merged, blended, poured ink—and the face of Tamara, and his hands,*

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<sup>102</sup> Korovin, *Memuari Konstantina Korovina*, 55.

<sup>103</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 11.

<sup>104</sup> Sarabyaninov, *Vrubel*, 67.

<sup>105</sup> Hardiman and Kozicharov, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, 44-52.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Gomborg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel*, 248-254.

*and the stars in the barred window. He was all like iron, his hands somehow aim, then with a strike, he captured the moment, stuck it to the cardboard, and so on with the other strikes.*<sup>108</sup>

When studying the Byzantine mosaics first in Kyiv and later in Venice, Vrubel acquired another important style attribute important to the *Demoniana* series.<sup>109</sup> Through his study of mosaics, he gained the ability to turn the reflective plane of the painting or drawing into a kind of light-emitting display. It was in the monochrome watercolors for the *Demoniana* series that Vrubel refined his understanding of color as a colored light penetrating the sheet of paper or canvas from within. In the Byzantine mosaics that Vrubel studied, the golden background was not absence or nothingness, but an event and action, namely, the radiance of light. This was the quality he applied to the mural sketches for the Vladimir Church.<sup>110</sup> In Vrubel's paintings, even an uncolored space is converted into radiance permeating the colored crystals as if they were substantive forms and shapes. In that regard, he masterfully used the concept of negative space to illuminate his drawings, watercolors, paintings, and murals sketches for the Vladimir Church.

Vrubel's technique learned from Venetian mosaics can be traced to other European masters of the next century. For example, in his so-called "golden" works, Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) also used the same principle of decor in *The Kiss* (1907-1908). The painting combines two layers, the real and the unreal.<sup>111</sup> Mosaics cover all the clothes and backgrounds of the painting, but are not used for the hands and faces of characters, giving a sense of the fabulousness of the occasion. Vrubel's graphic portion of the *Demoniana* demonstrated the same method a decade earlier than Klimt. Everything except the face and shoulders of the Demon is ornamental, and the background is almost a carpet of brush strokes. The ornamental texture images that Vrubel used were undoubtedly connected with the search for new decor, one of the characteristic tendencies of art during the late 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Korovin, *Memuari Konstantina Korovina*, 104.

<sup>109</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel'*, 11.

<sup>110</sup> Dmitrieva, *Mikhail Vrubel'*, 33.

<sup>111</sup> Kojá, *Gustav Klimt Landscapes*, 58.

<sup>112</sup> Howard, *Art Nouveau*, 6.





### 3.2. Formal analysis of the paintings in the *Demoniana* series

Scholars tend to include Vrubel's illustrations for Lermontov's "Demon" in the timeline of the *Demoniana*. However, it is important to understand that "Vrubel the painter" and "Vrubel the illustrator" set out with different goals concerning the *Demoniana* series.<sup>113</sup> This is evident in the difference between the paintings and the pencil sketches for the *Demoniana* series and the illustrations for Lermontov's poem. From here on, I will use the term "illustrations" to refer to the series of large sheets of watercolor monochrome drawings that were photographically reprinted for the anniversary edition of Lermontov's poem under Kushnerev's editorial team. These pieces were created as an independent work of art and answered only to the idea illustrated in Lermontov's poem. Vrubel goes on to use this idea and make it his own in the painted *Demoniana* series.

By May 1890, Mikhail Vrubel had already finished *The Demon Seated* (see fig.6).<sup>114</sup> Now on display at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and a favorite of the public, this work was described as "a painting that expressed maturity and completeness of Vrubel's talent" by one of Vrubel's contemporaries and his biographer.<sup>115</sup> It is clear that the image that we see in *The Demon Seated* is a completed work with imagery that originates from the earlier works of the master. This means that whatever inspired Mikhail Vrubel to produce this image existed long before he started working on the illustrations for Lermontov's poem.

*The Demon Seated* is rectangular in form and the canvas size is 116 x 213.8 cm. It was produced using oil paints on canvas and in its center is a seated figure. The Demon is hugging his knees, looking out into the landscape. His figure is muscular, and he is wearing only blue trousers. His torso is naked and concealed by his pose. The Demon's fingers are interlocked with his palms twisted outwards, creating a sense of anxiety in his body language. This feeling of unrest is mirrored in the messy and voluminous dark hair on his head. On either side of the figure, wild, fantastic plants are overgrown. Off-center to the left is a sunset that may or may not

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<sup>113</sup> Vrubel, *Pisma sestre*, 27.

<sup>114</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 39.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 67.

be the focus of the character's sad gaze. The artist uses his "faceted" technique in this painting and most of the image is laid out in shapes or strokes of the spatula and/or palette knife. The color scheme of *The Demon Seated* is reminiscent of the sketches of the murals for the Saint Vladimir Church, using various hues of blue, violet, pink, and magenta. Light aquarells translate easily to the oil on canvas for the painting and give a surreal quality to the piece.

When Vrubel was offered the chance to illustrate any of the works of Mikhail Lermontov. He chose to illustrate the poems "Ismail Bey," "The Mermaid," "The Jewish Melody," and "The Journalist, Reader, and Writer," as well as Lermontov's novel, "A Hero of Our Time" and the poem "Demon".<sup>116</sup> He could have chosen any of the listed works by Lermontov, including the ones that were already illustrated by other artists. Such variety in terms of the time of creation, the ideological content, and artistic form of the product were the choice of the artist himself.

It was important for the editor's team to pick out the precise illustrations that would flatter the immortal works of Mikhail Lermontov.<sup>117</sup> Vrubel was undoubtedly one of those masters who was attracted to the unknown and eager to research and dig deeper. It was easy for him to follow the rules of the editors, and not just recreate the images of the characters but also dramatize them and look inside them. Vrubel needed to discover their inner passion and the motive behind every decision of the characters. And in this, Vrubel succeeded brilliantly.

This work untied Vrubel's creative powers. It helped him to finally develop his creative self. In a series of illustrations for the poem "Demon," Vrubel revealed his understanding of works of Lermontov, but more figuratively, he sought to recreate the story that inspired the poet to write about the love between the immortal Demon and a human girl, Tamara.<sup>118</sup>

Vrubel completely understood what he was looking at when he saw Lermontov's character. It takes one look at "Head of the Demon", the illustration that Vrubel created for Lermontov's poem, to see the difference that the artist has built into the image of the Demon (see fig.12). With a storm of messy hair and eyes that

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<sup>116</sup> Sarabyaninov, *Vrubel'*, 11.

<sup>117</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel' and Lermontov*, 44.

<sup>118</sup> Lermontov, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, Vol.2.

pierce through your soul, this is Lermontov's Demon. A gigantic rock-like figure that dominates the landscape, he is in his element (see fig.12). Lermontov's superbeing is very different from the sad, insecure, lonesome figure of *The Demon Seated*.<sup>119</sup>

This piece, the first drawing of the series of the illustrations for the poem "Demon," is known as the "Head of the Demon with mountains in the background" (see fig.11). In Kushnerev's publication, this piece was on the first page that opens the poem. Despite the small size of the illustrations, Vrubel created a monumental image. He organically linked the "faceted" dissected watercolor swabs in the treatment of the mountains in a way that correlates with the portrayal of the hair on the head of the Demon. The outline of the mountains traces the contour of the Demon's hair, thus linking the image to the landscape and giving it a characteristic similar to the imagery in the poem. The Demon is described as a reckless spirit flying through the mountains indulging in disdain and contempt.<sup>120</sup>

"Demon flying" is a small watercolor that never made it into the anniversary edition but also shows the development of the character (see fig.13). In fact, most of these illustrations are sketch-like and never made it into the official publication. But it is in the analysis of these interim, transitional works that we can see evidence of the differences between the two series. "Demon flying" shows a figure of the Demon with large wings floating in the sky, His demeanor is calm, and he is pensive, supporting his head with his hand while flying over the mountains. The piece is sepia and monochrome.

"Tamara Dancing" is a complex composition (see fig.14). In the center of the piece is the Demon. He lays perched on a rock overlooking a Georgian party, where Tamara is dancing. She is captured mid-dance with her torso turned away from the viewer, but her head and face are turned toward the viewer. There are musicians in the background, but they only serve to fill the composition. The intensity of the dance and the musicality of the brushstrokes that Mikhail Vrubel used here makes the girl seem almost alive with the rhythm of the dance. The Demon is quite entranced, but his body is rigid and still, very much in contrast to Tamara's dancing figure.

After the Demon facilitated the sudden death of her fiancé, Tamara is

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<sup>119</sup> Lermontov, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, Vol.2.

<sup>120</sup> Dmitrieva, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 66.

inconsolable and cries in her tower (see fig.15). Her braided hair is almost an extension of her grief, as her body bends over the bed and she covers her muffled cries in her hands in the watercolor “Tamara crying.” The demon is towering over her discreetly, foreshadowing her demise as he whispers sweet nothings in her ear. At this point in the plot of the poem, the Demon materializes first in her dreams and then in the flesh before her, whispering words of love to her. She falls in love with him. For a moment he is hesitant, and knowing that she will die, the Demon hesitates at the walls of the monastery.<sup>121</sup> A set of two sketches that never made it to the publication are named “Demon at the walls of the sanctuary.” Here, we see a walled monastery building where Tamara is held before her wedding night. The Demon stands alone, dressed in a dark cloak, expressively biting on his fist.<sup>122</sup> This is the first place where we see the visual portrayal of the Demon match Lermontov’s description (see fig.16). In the poem, he is described as “clutching,” his hand curled into a tight fist. There are two variations in Vrubel’s sketches. One has the Demon with his hand shaped into a fist and one shows the Demon with his hand plastered next to his torso with fingers spread apart. This is the moment of contemplation, in essence, the moment when the Demon decides to do what he does.

One of the most expressive illustrations of the series is called “Love me!”(see fig.17). This is treated as a command from the Demon whose body is twice as big as Tamara and her frail figure is overpowered by his might, as she trembles in his hands. Her face is elevated, and they are shown locking eyes. There is, however, a hint of domination in this image. This is not the embrace of two happy lovers, celebrating their reunion. Tamara has accepted her fate and no longer fights her desire. The whole composition uses Vrubel’s signature “carpet-like” structure of the sepia tones. The monochrome palette does not limit Vrubel; it makes the images even more expressive, limiting any color surges and accentuating the raw emotion of the Demon’s lustful gaze. The two lovers are sharing their last moments together, as the kiss of the immortal will be deadly to the human girl. The next illustration of this series is “Angel Taking Tamara’s Soul”(see fig.18). The Demon is curled up in the lower-left corner of the image, as the Angel and Tamara, covered in a green hue,

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<sup>121</sup> Isdebsky-Pritchard, *The Art of Mikhail Vrubel*, 68.

<sup>122</sup> Lermontov, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, Vol.2., 17.

ascend into the heavens. It is at this point that the Demon is fully aware of his curse and feels trapped and betrayed. He is like a child, scornful and dismayed, not grieving for Tamara but the loss of his innocence. This reveals his true narcissistic nature. The Angel that takes Tamara's soul looks at the Demon with sadness, realizing there is nothing he can do to help this lost soul. This image concludes the illustrated cycle that Mikhail Vrubel created for the anniversary edition of Mikhail Lermontov's poems.<sup>123</sup>

The next resurgence of the *Demoniana* series came with the completion of *Demon in Flight* in 1899 (see fig.7). Today, this painting is on exhibit in the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg. It is oil on canvas and its size is 138.5 x 430.5 cm. This painting was made during a turbulent time in Mikhail Vrubel's life and it shows. Nevertheless, this painting stands out from the illustrations and it was made and exhibited in Moscow. The canvas is rather long and accentuates the Demon's elongated body. The pose of the Demon is quite irregular. However, this pose is not new to Vrubel. He used a similar pose in his painting *Morning* (1897) (see fig.25). The pose of the Demon is reminiscent of the young man in that painting.<sup>124</sup> The man is awakened by the fairies that run amok in the gardens. In the Russian Museum, these two images are exhibited side by side and, as if mirrored from the boy in the *Morning* painting, the demon in *Demon in Flight* floats through the sky with a similar hand gesture and a twisted body, as if waking up from a dream. The figure of the flying demon is so full of speed, so dynamic, that it almost seems to leave the painting, allowing only a glimpse of his distorted body and wings with a background of snowy mountains. The Demon uses his right elbow as a base to rest his head and his left-hand folds around back so that the torso faces the viewer, whereas the lower part of his body, legs, and feet are in profile. His friend and contemporary Valentin Serov even mentioned this painting in his diary.<sup>125</sup> He thought that Vrubel had somehow "lost it." The painter might have been experiencing the beginnings of the onset of his debilitating mental illness.<sup>126</sup> The only thing stopping the Demon from flying out of sight is the heavy clock that drapes in a decorative pattern around his

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<sup>123</sup> Lermontov, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, Vol.2., 20.

<sup>124</sup> Sternin, *Ot Repina Do Vrubelia*, 92-93.

<sup>125</sup> Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, 131.

<sup>126</sup> Shumskiy, *Vrubel: zhizn' i bolezni*, 21.

waist. His wings are almost lost from sight because of the dark tones of the color scheme.

The next painting in the series gives more insight into the character development and the story behind Vrubel's Demon. *The Demon Downcast* was completed in 1902 and is on exhibit at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow (see fig.8). It is oil on canvas and 139 x 387 cm. In this painting, the Demon is even more constrained by the size of the canvas than in the previous iteration. His body is no longer muscular, he is extremely thin, his body is frail, and the only thing betraying his frailty is his angry stare. He is downcast on a bed of sparkly peacock feathers. Mikhail Vrubel deliberately added bronze flakes so that the paint would sparkle in this piece. This glow is not visible anymore as the painting is over 100 years old, but it was, in its heyday, a visionary work.

The last painting in the *Demoniana* series is called *The Six-winged Seraphim (Azrael)*, 1904. It is oil on canvas, 131 x 155 cm, and belongs to the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg (see fig.9). It is a first in many ways. It is the first time we see the full wings of the Angel and the first time we see his entire face. This is no longer a landscape; it is a full portrait and the body is no longer illustrated. Two-thirds of the painting is devoted to the portrait of the Angel. The iconography is very symbolic and almost biblical in a sense. Azrael is wearing a bejeweled crown, in his left hand he carries a lantern to shine the light for the souls, and in his right hand the sword to ward off the sinners.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Kornilova, 'Iz istorii Ikonopisnogo klassa Akademii Khudozhestv', 73–77.

### 3.3. Interpretation and analysis of the paintings in the *Demoniana* series: metaphors and symbolism

Vrubel used his self-portrait as a basis for faces in his early works.<sup>128</sup> But did he use it out of necessity, because he had no other face to paint off of, or did he perceive himself to be the struggling nihilistic Prince of Denmark? This seems to be the favorite touchstone of researchers in the 20th century. They seem so enamored with the idea that Vrubel was somehow the source of his own demise, mentally distraught from the beginning of his life, only to make up an image of a painter suffering for his art.<sup>129</sup> In this study, I disregard this interpretation of the Demon character because it is obvious from the origins of imagery that the dark-haired young man first appeared in the sketches of Moses for the Vladimir Church. Moreover, it lays coherently with Erwin Panofsky's idea of iconology. Later on, this same figure was transformed in the *Demoniana* series through the same lens. Throughout his career, Vrubel played with the androgynous nature of the Demon, sometimes expressing a more feminine nature, a non-binary figure. It is impossible to say what the Demon really is, but as the Demon is a celestial creature, it can be assumed that the gender is not that important for Vrubel.

It is worth mentioning, that Mikhail Vrubel was never shy of creating religious images. During his time at the Academy, Vrubel frequented the collection of ancient 16th-century icons at the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg and was undoubtedly moved by the austerity.<sup>130</sup> In these images, we can see the origins of the austere, the severe, and the stern. These resonated in his later work and, particularly, in the sketches for a monumental mural in Kyiv (see fig.21). Mikhail Vrubel was raised as a devout Christian, although, by his own account, he considered himself more spiritual than Christian in the traditional sense. Perhaps it was because of his personal convictions that Mikhail Vrubel was able to produce an image of the Antichrist in such a compelling way.<sup>131</sup> It began with Vrubel creating images of ancient prophets, including Moses, a prophet of God. The young, dark-haired figure is austere and is posed in a full frontality, following the tradition of Byzantium mosaic (see fig.22).

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<sup>128</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel'*, 16.

<sup>129</sup> Tarabukin, *Mikhail Vrubel'*, 27.

<sup>130</sup> Piatnitskii, 'Muzei drevnerusskogo iskusstva Akademii khudozhestv', 14–19.

<sup>131</sup> Durylin, "Vrubel' i Lermontov", 541–622.

Another clue in these early works can be found in the sketches for the murals, particularly in the poses of the sinners. Their bodies are flanking the image of the Virgin and they are contorted and twisted in agony and shame (see fig.24). Presumably, Vrubel used these images to create the composition of *The Demon Seated*. The pose, the facial features and hair are all very similar.<sup>132</sup> Not unlike any artist of that time, Mikhail Vrubel also signaled his own existential doubts and long-term interest in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche by placing Christ and the Virgin Mary in an antithetical position towards the official Church Doctrine.<sup>133</sup> So, by using the same imagery in the portrayal of the Holy Virgin and the Demon he tries to combine the ineffable, thus creating a new symbolic image on the basis of the orthodox tradition (see fig. 21-24).

The painter's early experiments showed his fondness of the characters created by William Shakespeare (Hamlet and Ophelia, 1888) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Faust and Marguerite, Mephistopheles, 1889). It is worth emphasizing once again that Vrubel did not perceive his Demon as an infernal creature. Based on his drawings on the theme of Goethe's Faust, we can say that Vrubel did not see a similarity between Mephistopheles and the Demon.<sup>134</sup> We should also bear in mind the differences of interpretation, understanding, and iconography seen in the Russian and Western European traditions in painting. Vrubel's secret lay in the fact that he reshaped the image of his "illuminated" Demon from Lucifer, the *enlightened* Angel, devoid of paradise, doomed to spend eternity in loneliness. He strove to move away from the interpretation of his hero as the personification of darkness. His Demon was not the one from the old traditions and modern interpretations of European Symbolism. Vrubel once said: "*The Demon should not be confused with the Devil ... and 'Daemon' in Greek ... means 'soul.'*"<sup>135</sup> In many ways, the example of the different treatment of the demonic Mephistopheles and the melancholy of Hamlet was disclosed in the artistic embodiment of the image of the Demon (see fig.19,20). The metaphor of flight was also portrayed differently in the flight of Mephistopheles and Faust since it was not Mephisto flying but his magic cape. In the

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<sup>132</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 78.

<sup>133</sup> Isdebsky-Pritchard, 'Art for Philosophy's Sake', 219–48.

<sup>134</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel and Lermontov*, 45.

<sup>135</sup> Vrubel, *Pisma sestry*, 39.



*Demoniana* series, flight is linked with the idea of rest (e.g., in *Demon in Flight*).<sup>136</sup>

The crashing Demon in *Demon Downcast* is laid out on the feathers of a peacock, which, in the Christian tradition, symbolizes rebirth and absolution. Vrubel was aware of this symbolism because he used the same motifs for the St. Cyril Church.<sup>137</sup> This bed of feathers is a clue to the fate of the Demon. He crashed but he was reborn as Azrael, the Angel of Death. He is compassionate and yet strict, the way he appears in *Six-Winged Seraphim*. Even the distortion of the figure is an element of storytelling. The demon is no longer ether, a spirit without a body like he was in *Demon in Flight*. He has become made of flesh and bone (mostly bone, as the figure is still very frail) but the gesture he makes shows him to be as adamant as he ever was. He may be downcast, but he is not broken; he does not give up the fight.

Even though Vrubel received classic academic training, he nonetheless chose to free himself from the constructs of human anatomy and in his painting. He deformed the body of the Demon, which adds to its supernatural qualities even if the moment depicted is completely ordinary. Vrubel also chose to change the shapes and sizes of flowers and the surrounding natural phenomena in order to add to the internal turmoil of his character. This all becomes evident through a detailed formal analysis of Vrubel's painting style and using the methods of iconology, interchanging the meanings and classifying the religious origins in a symbolist paradygm. Moreover, it is clear that Vrubel was not in pursuit of a glorified romanticization of his character. In actuality, he was interested in displaying realistically how the Demon changes the atmosphere around him when he morphs from celestial to human and back again. The color palette changes mirroring the mood of the character: in *Demon seated* it's a melancholic sunset, complete with hues of pink and glows of yellow, in *Demon in flight*, the aura around the Demon changes, as he pierces through the night sky. And in *Demon Downcast*, the painting seems to be completely devoid of air, as if the frail body of the fallen Demon sucked out all the colors from the world.

The *Demoniana* cycle is a series of drawn, painted, and sculptural images that Mikhail Vrubel worked on throughout his entire life. He began developing his ideas

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<sup>136</sup> Suzdalev, *Vrubel' and Lermontov*, 45.

<sup>137</sup> Sarabyaninov, *Vrubel'*, 82.

for the series when he lived in Kyiv from 1884–1889. At the time, he was working on the decoration for the Church of St. Cyril in Kyiv. Vrubel intended to create an iconic character that would make his name immortal and he was inspired by Mikhail Lermontov's poem "Demon." Taking Lermontov's literary prototype, Vrubel created his own Demon that was somewhat similar to the hero of the poem. But part of this creation of his was entirely new and understandable only to him, a creation of new iconography, based on orthodox iconographic origins. It is most important to understand that Vrubel did not conceive his Demon to be a negative character in the *Demoniana* series. After all, he based his composition and imagery on the Byzantine ecclesiastical tradition used to depicting prophets, rather than on the tradition of depicting fallen angels as terrible and hideous creatures. The cultural and philosophical background of the character of the Demon sheds light on Vrubel's reimagining of the character.

However, by his own description, Vrubel does not mean a satanic prince. He reveals that his understanding of the Demon relates to the original meaning of the Greek term *daimon* (δαίμων), which means "full of wisdom," "god," "spirit," and "genius." In Greek mythology, a supernatural being or spirit, which is usually a deity of a lower order, can have both positive and negative qualities. In the Christian tradition, this dichotomy is lost, and a spirit is usually evil. Socrates (470 BC-399 BC) taught that the *daemon* is a voice that echoes in his head, with whom he talks.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Socrates interestingly enough did not deny that perhaps he was talking to himself (Tarabukin 1974, p.155).

## CONCLUSION

Mikhail Vrubel's unique place in history is remarkable because he exhibits characteristics of all the different artistic tendencies of his age and appropriately fits into all of them to an extent. This makes his style unique for 19th- and 20th-century art in Russia.<sup>139</sup> Mikhail Vrubel was a brilliant artist who left his unique mark on many mediums of art.<sup>140</sup> In his artistic heritage, we find academic brilliance brewed with tradition and original style. This thesis centered on the origins of the most famous of Mikhail Vrubel's creations—the *Demoniana* series.

The *Demoniana* represents not only Vrubel's philosophical study of human nature but also a whole understanding of the ideas of the time.<sup>141</sup> Vrubel began working on the *Demoniana* at the start of his career, clearly indicating the early formation of the main stylistic features and motifs in *The Demon Seated* (1890). The genesis of the *Demoniana* is extremely important in the context of Vrubel's creative world. This is why I took the time to explain the biographical peculiarities of Vrubel's early childhood and later years, as well as the impact that Pavel Chistyakov's studio had on the young painter and his career path in Chapter 2. Along with setting the framework for this study, it allowed the reader to understand the origins of Vrubel's painterly technique. It was important to know exactly the timeline and trajectory of the *Demoniana* series as a whole for a more in-depth and accurate understanding of his research process, the conception and adaptation of his understanding of the Demon, and the embodiment of the idea that had such a strong hold on the painter's mind so early in his career and that refused to let go until his untimely death.

The study aimed to examine the themes of the Demon illustrations and their shared origins with the painted series. These objectives were facilitated by the analysis of the literary and ideological foundations of the idea that Vrubel conceived.

<sup>142</sup> I have discussed the literary context of the poem and what exactly Vrubel saw in Lermontov's hero that he developed into his own hero later on through the prism of his time and generation.

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<sup>139</sup> Sternin, *Hudozhestvennaya zhiizn' Rossii*, 70.

<sup>140</sup> Dmitrieva, *Mikhail Vrubel'*, 37.

<sup>141</sup> Hardiman and Kozicharov, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, 47.

<sup>142</sup> Isdebsky-Pritchard, *The Art of Mikhail Vrubel*, 22.

This research undertook an art historical analysis of the illustrations and painted series of the *Demoniana* cycle in Chapter 3. Upon investigating the cultural traditions of that time, the Vrubel's painterly techniques, and the conditions that led to the creation of his Demon, I have concluded that the *Demoniana* cycle was most likely a process that evolved through time but most certainly had a common imagery origin for both the illustrations and the paintings.

The evidence of shared origins came from the study of Vrubel's early works in pencil sketches, murals, and paintings. His obvious interest in the imagery of prophets, angels, and suffering souls like Hamlet or Faust led to the assumption that Vrubel was, in fact, conducting a study of his own nature, frequently using his own facial features to portray and convey the idea of mental torment in his characters. The *Demoniana* series was no different. Throughout his career as a painter, Vrubel used every source of new imagery and tried it out on the Demon character. It became an addiction for him and a way to adapt his unique style of drawing and painting to the sacred world of spirituality.

This artist absorbed traditions like a sponge, and his Demon character became a unique blend, a crossroads where the tradition of the Byzantine murals met the realistic tradition of the 19th century. All of this could not have happened without a certain interest in symbolism and spirituality. In terms of its development, the *Demoniana* was conceived as a symbolic work of art meant to represent the image of the time—a time of change and soul-searching for many others close to Vrubel in spirit.

The anniversary edition of Lermontov's work was one of the first successful illustrated books of poetry in Russia. Vrubel's watercolor series for Lermontov's "Demon" led to its success. This success led to the further development of book illustration in Russia and influenced the *Demoniana* series. Researchers studying the *Demoniana* series concentrated on the most spectacular part of it, the painted works. However, my research restores the entire picture, exploring the common origins of the painting and watercolor series. I highlight the main differences between Vrubel's Demon and its prototype found in Lermontov's poem titled "Demon," also reinforcing the idea of continuity in Vrubel's work on the series.

One of the aims of this work was to show the illustrations as a stepping stone

for the painted series. Through an analysis of literary and ideological foundations of design, I have argued that the imagery shares a common origin even though Vrubel had problems adapting his own beliefs to those of Lermontov. Based on the analysis, it became apparent that, despite Vrubel's love for Lermontov's poetry, the artist had difficulty accessing the image of Lermontov's Demon. This was due primarily to the internal conflict of the Demon in Vrubel's own mind. Lermontov's haughty, cruel Demon is reborn into a monster and falsely seduces a pure, innocent girl, while the Vrubel's Demon is not able to survive the destruction that he himself caused. In the end, he is conquered and defeated, having fallen on a bed of rocks. Thus, we can conclude that Vrubel created a completely new character, of which Lermontov's Demon was a prototype. Vrubel's Demon was a hero of the organic era of the early 20th century. At the end of Lermontov's poem, the Demon is left in loneliness, consumed by his pride and contempt, whereas Vrubel's Demon is reborn as an angel to serve a purpose in the painted version.

This research discovered not only that the *Demoniana* cycle is a two-part piece with one literary origin, but also that it is truly two different works of art. When conflicted by the differences of Lermontov's character, the painter struggled between his desire to create a new character and the fact that he was bound to illustrate Lermontov's piece. This conflict allowed Vrubel to differentiate between the two characters. Despite the presence of the common version of the character of a fallen angel, Lermontov and Vrubel still did not see eye to eye. It seems possible that because Vrubel wanted to show the world the Demon the way he saw it, Vrubel looked for new ways to explain and show the true nature of the Demon to the public. To accomplish this, he used an allusion to the prophet Moses from his work on the murals at St. Cyril's Church and an allusion to the sinners in the watercolor sketch, "Resurrection", along with the same physical attributes of the fairy-like creature from the painted panno "Morning".<sup>143</sup>

In technical terms, the *Demoniana* is a masterpiece that embodies all of Vrubel's artistic techniques. Vrubel himself has most accurately identified the sources of his art when he said that "technology is the ability to see, and creativity is the ability to feel deeply." In Vrubel's definition, we find the very principle of the Art

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<sup>143</sup> Yaremich, *Mikhail Vrubel*, 68.

Nouveau style.<sup>144</sup> The viewer moves his gaze on the surface of the painting, panels, or tiles, but not in-depth, and this movement can be extended mentally beyond the canvas. Along with the ornamentation, the decorative patterns are the most important feature of Vrubel's creative genius. What makes the *Demoniana* special is the picturesque decorativism and rhythmic structure of the work. It is important that the color system in the works by Vrubel not only plays into his decorative feature but also becomes part of a meaningful program. Contemporaries appreciated Vrubel's adherent liberation of painting from imitation by using the methods that were inherently realistic.

Brought up in the walls of the Academy, Vrubel often liked to say that the main provisions Pavel Chistyakov provided him with were no more than a "formula" of his "living relationship to nature."<sup>145</sup> Nevertheless, the artist's inclination towards the bizarre and fantastic allowed him to give depth to the plot structure through decor and composition in his drawings and paintings. The most startling revelation in his creation of the Demon's nature is the fantastic depth of the hero's penetration into reality. With much scrutiny and detail, the artist brings his creation to life. Using his unique painterly technique, Vrubel managed to express the fickle, elusive, and, at the same time, profound truth of the era in which he lived.

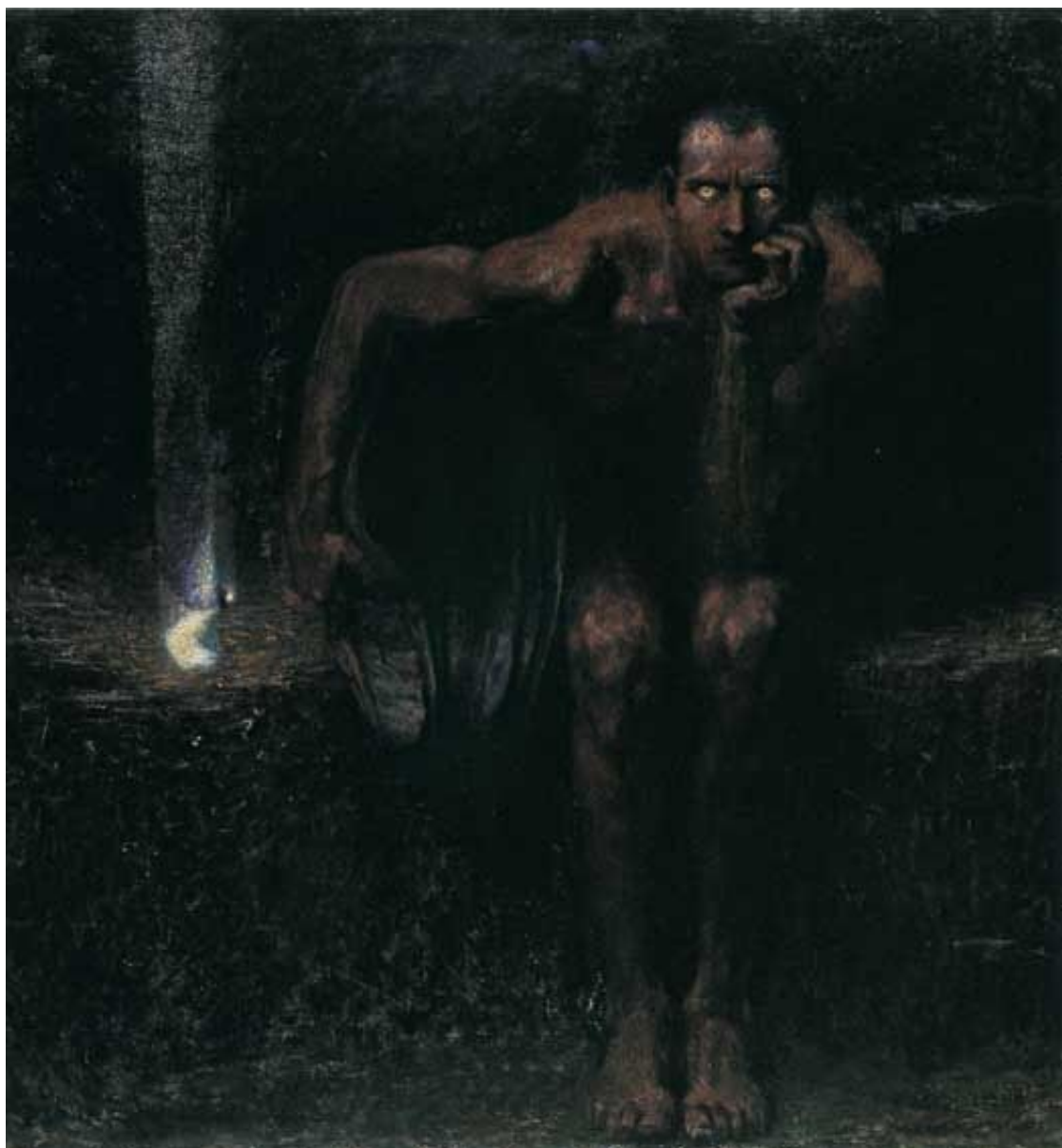
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<sup>144</sup> Howard, *Art Nouveau*, 8.

<sup>145</sup> Korovin, *Memuari Konstantina Korovina*, 100.

## Illustrations

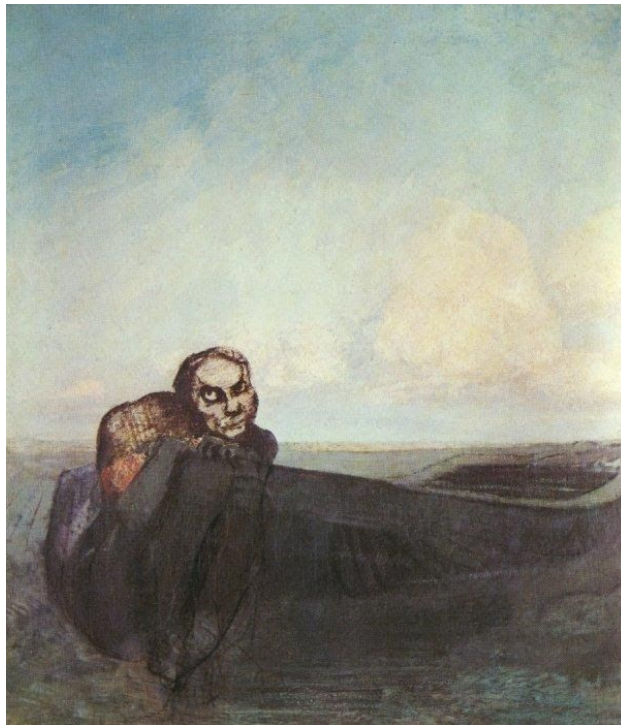
1. Franz von Stuck(1863-1928). *Lucifer*. 1890. National Gallery of Art, Sofia, Bulgaria. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia.



2. Odilon Redon (1840-1916). *Fallen Angel*. 1890-1895. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands.



3. Odilon Redon (1840-1916). *Angel of Destiny*. 1890-1895. Private Collection.





4. Gustave Moreau (1826-1898). *The Chimera*. Oil on canvas, 27,3 x 33 cm. (1867)  
Fogg Museum (Harvard Art Museums), Cambridge, MA, USA. Photograph in the  
public domain. Wikimedia.





5. Hugo Simberg (1873-1917). *Haavoittunut enkeli (Wounded Angel)*. 1903. Oil on canvas, 137x154cm, Ateneum, Helsinki. Photograph in the public domain.

Wikimedia.



6. Mikhail Vrubel, *Demon Seated*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 116 x 213.8 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia.



7. Mikhail Vrubel, *Demon in flight*, 1899. Oil on canvas, 138.5 x 430.5 cm. The Russian Museum, Saint-Peterburg. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia.

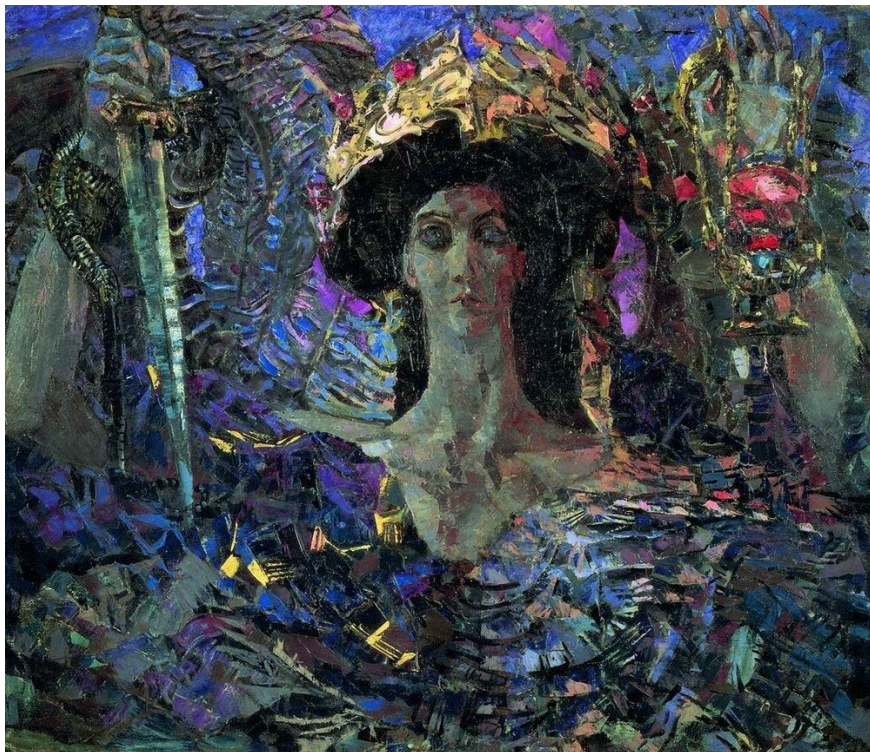




8. Mikhail Vruble, *Demon Downcast*, 1902. Oil on canvas, 139 x 387 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia.



9. Mikhail Vruble, *The Six-winged Seraphim (Azrael)*, 1904. Oil on canvas, 131 x 155 cm. State Russian Museum, Saint-Petersburg. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia.





10. Mikhail Vrubel, *Head of an Angel*, 1887. Charcoal and red crayon on paper, 41 x 68 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain.



11. Mikhail Vrubel. *Demon's head with a background of mountains*. Watercolor on paper. 1890-1891. Kyiv Museum of Russian Art, Kyiv, Ukraine.





12. Mikhail Vrubel. *Demon's head*. Sketch in pencil. 1890-1891. Kyiv Museum of Russian Art, Kyiv, Ukraine. Photograph in the public domain.



13. Mikhail Vrubel. *Demon flying*. Diagonal. Watercolor on paper. 1890-1891. S. Khenkin Collection. Moscow, Russia. Photograph in the public domain.





14. Mikhail Vrubel. *Tamara Dancing*. Watercolor on paper. 1890-1891. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. Photograph in the public domain.





15. Mikhail Vruble. *Tamara Crying*. Watercolor on paper. 1890-1891. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia.





16. Mikhail Vrubel. *Demon at the walls of the monastery*. Watercolor on paper.  
1890-1891. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia.



17. Mikhail Vrubel. *Love me!* Watercolor on paper. 1890-1891. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. Photograph in the public domain.





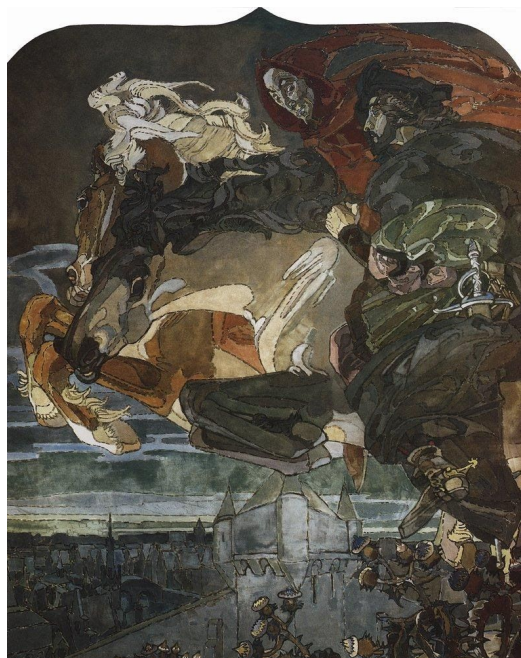
18. Mikhail Vrubel. *Demon and the Angel with Tamara's soul*. Watercolor on paper. 1890-1891. E. Geltser Collection, Moscow, Russia. Photograph in the public domain.



19. Mikhail Vrubel. *Hamlet and Ophelia*. Oil on canvas. 1888. State Tretyakov Gallery. Moscow, Russia.



20. Mikhail Vrubel. *Faust and Mephistopheles*. Oil on canvas. 1889. State Tretyakov Gallery. Moscow, Russia.

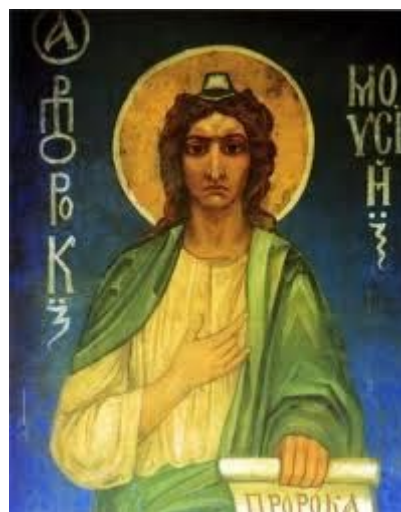




21. Mikhail Vrubel. *The descent of the Holy Spirit*. 1884. Murals in the Church of St. Cyril. Kyiv, Ukraine.



22. Mikhail Vrubel. *Moses*. 1884. Murals in the Church of St. Cyril. Kyiv, Ukraine.



23. Mikhail Vrubel, *Angel with a Candle*, 1887. Watercolour, pencil, and varnish on paper, 69 x 26 cm. State Museum of Russian Art, Kyiv. Photograph in the public domain.



24. Mikhail Vrubel, *Ascension*, 1887. Sketch for a mural in the St Vladimir Cathedral, Kyiv. Pencil, watercolor, and whitewash on paper, 43.4 x 59.2 cm. State Museum of Russian Art, Kyiv. Photograph in the public domain.





25. Mikhail Vrubel, *The Morning*. 1897. Oil on canvas, 261 x 446 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph in the public domain.



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